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County settles contamination case

By Natalie Singer

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King County has agreed to pay a \$29,500 penalty to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to settle a case involving toxic contamination from leaking light fixtures at a Bellevue day-care center.

King County owned the site at 609 112th Ave. S.E. where the Surrydowns Children's Center was operating before it was shut down last August.

A health survey of the building revealed several problems, including hazardous polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in brown liquid that was dripping from the light fixtures. PCBs are a suspected cause of cancer and linked to other health problems.

The county subsequently spent \$81,500 to clean up and dispose of the PCBs, and the property has since been transferred to the city of Bellevue, which has no plans yet for the site.

But the issue is not completely resolved. The EPA also filed a complaint last week against the operator of the center, Debbie Coburn, who leased the property from King County.

Under the Toxic Substances Control Act, the property owner and operator are jointly responsible for cleaning up contamination. The EPA complaint, which gives Coburn 30 days to respond, proposes a \$44,900 penalty for the contamination.

Coburn could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Besides the PCB contamination, a survey of the center last June by the state Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) also cited mold growing on the ceilings, walls, countertops and sinks, water-damaged ceilings and unsafe electrical receptacles.

In its report, the EPA said it did not believe children were exposed to dangerous levels of PCBs. The potential existed for some future exposure because of the eroding light fixtures, the report said.

The allowable level of PCBs, which were banned 25 years ago, is 50 parts per million. In samples taken throughout the facility, levels greatly exceeded that limit.

Liquid PCBs were found throughout the center, including the main office and in the preschool, kindergarten and after-school areas, according to the complaint.

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